

# WESTSOUND HOME & GARDEN

Living on the Kitsap Peninsula



ASK FOR EXTRA NAPKINS

## The Blazing Onion Burger Company

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It's the smell that lures you first. Make your way along Point Fosdick Drive in Gig Harbor at the right time of the day and it curls in through open windows and air vents like an irresistible invitation. Even if you weren't already planning on eating at the Blazing Onion Burger Co., your car may make the turn into the parking lot for you.

Once inside, the decisions have only begun. You can have a burger, sure: there are 25 gourmet burgers on the menu, most featuring 100 percent ground chuck, but there are also wild boar, buffalo, lamb, and house-made turkey burgers available. Don't eat meat? Any of the burgers can be made with a vegetarian patty.

If you aren't feeling like a burger, there are several meal-sized salads, fish and chicken sandwiches, and full dinner plates with offerings like meatloaf & mashed potatoes or Cajun fettuccine. Or maybe you'd just like a bowl of Outlaw 3-Bean Chili or Blazing Onion French onion Soup.

Save room for dessert. There are no fewer than 10 dessert options, many of them made in-house, including the owner's personal recipe for Reese's Peanut Butter Pie.

The Blazing Onion, where extra napkins are required, is the creation of husband-and-wife team and co-owners David and Lorri Jones. The couple opened their first restaurant in Mill Creek in 2007; Gig Harbor is their third, and so far their most profitable location.

The couple has plans to open a fourth restaurant soon, at Alderwood Mall, and recently began offering franchising opportunities – not bad for a burgeoning gourmet burger empire barely four years old.

It's easy to think "chain restaurant" at first, but one thing becomes quickly apparent when talking to David Jones: The Blazing Onion Burger Co. is very much a labor of love for the Joneses, and their hands on involvement and strict quality control easily banishes any premature comparisons to bigger, better-known and more impersonal chains. For one thing, the company has bona fide roots in the Pacific Northwest. David is very much a native Washingtonian, born in Vancouver and raised for much of his life east of the mountains in the Tri-Cities, as is Lorri, born in Longview and living most of her life right here in greater Seattle.

While David was painting houses following his graduation from high school, he got his first restaurant job, at Wendy's, to make extra money. He was quickly promoted to manager. From there, he went to Panhandler Pies, where he became a general manager by the time he was 20 years old.

A fortuitous transfer from Coeur D'Alene, Idaho, to Lynnwood crossed his path with Lorri, who was working as a waitress at the time. At first, they kept their relationship a secret. "We started dating full time when she quit," Jones says.

When Panhandler Pies went out of business, Jones began a 13-year career with Denny's Restaurants, training managers and troubleshooting for problem restaurants. He and Lorri had three children in five years. Lorri returned to school part time and got her accounting degree. One day, she approached her husband with an advertisement for a Subway franchise. "We had just enough money to get into it," Jones says. The store, in West Seattle, quickly benefited from Jones' constant presence and 60-hour work weeks. "Customers love having the owner make their sandwich," he says.

By the end of the year, Jones had halved his work week, the store was profitable and he had time to pursue one of his lifelong passions, coaching kids (he has been a longtime umpire for both softball and baseball, from Little League on up to college). Eventually, he and Lorri would own six Subway franchises, all of them profitable and exemplary of Jones' management style. "I always believed that if you worked really hard and taught people high standards from the beginning, you would have high quality in your business," he says. "I try to hire people that are better than me at something when I hire managers. I hire people who add something and who challenge me."

By 2004, the couple had started talking seriously about starting their own restaurant, often collecting menus wherever they ate and bandying about concepts and names. They decided to feature gourmet burgers, and the name Blazing Onion came up during a brainstorming session while they drove to visit their daughter at college.

When the first Blazing Onion opened in Mill Creek in 2007, Lorri quit her job as the Controller at Redhook Ale Brewery and became the Chief Financial Officer of the Blazing Onion. David serves as the Chief Executive Officer.

It was a rocky start. The 2,500-foot space turned out to be too small, so the couple had to make accommodations like building an outside freezer and locating a walk-in refrigerator for more food

storage in a downstairs parking garage. And despite their plan for a “soft” opening (without a lot of advertising), there was a line out the door almost from the minute they opened.

Predictably, problems ensued. The hoods they’d installed in the kitchen couldn’t keep up with the volume of burgers being cooked, often sending smoke billowing out into the dining room. The cooks couldn’t keep up with the orders. In Jones’ own blog, he describes the opening as “eight weeks of chaos and nightmares that would scare away most business startups.”

In the style of most successful business entrepreneurs, though, the Joneses kept learning from their mistakes and making corrections. In fact, you can read all about it on the story boards they’ve installed in the hallway of the Gig Harbor restaurant, one for each of the three stores.

When they opened the second restaurant, in Snohomish, they added additional square footage and a bar. It was their first attempt at mixing the fast-casual concept, where customers order at the counter and then sit down to service-on-demand, with full service (in the bar). It proved to be a popular combination, but they found that the bar was too small. When they built the Gig Harbor restaurant, they bumped up the square footage again and evenly divided the space between the dining room in front and the bar in the back. It turned out to be the winning combination, according to Jones. “Our future restaurants will mirror Gig Harbor,” he says.

It’s something you notice right away when talking to Jones: He expresses the same relentless commitment to learning and improving as he did to getting the first loan for the Blazing Onion (which took him multiple attempts). “If you stop learning, you stop trying,” he says. “You have to be that way because when you stop, it’s time to sell.”

This attitude carries over to the menu as well. There is not only a commitment to top-quality ingredients - 100 percent ground chuck from Painted Hills Natural Beef for the burger patties, buns especially made for them and delivered daily from Coeur D’Alene French Baking Co., thick peppered bacon, Tillamook cheese, just to name a few – but also a commitment to constantly improving their product. As an example, their current vegetarian patty, chosen after much consideration, will only be on the menu until the couple develops their own. “Lorri is a very big perfectionist,” Jones says, “so she won’t go to it (their own patty) until she thinks its right.”

The couple often test recipes on friends first and listen to their feedback. Sometimes, they involve their cooks and managers in developing new products. “We’ll come up with part of the idea and let the team come up with the rest of it,” Jones says. Or in one case, even a relative: When Lorri went looking to add French onion soup to the menu; she looked at recipes for more than a year, according to Jones. “We decided we were going to do it, but it had to be great. After all, we are the Blazing Onion,” Jones says. Eight tastings and many recipes later, the winning recipe was from Lorri’s cousin, Buffi. “But she never writes anything down, so I told her she had to write the recipe down if she wanted to participate,” Jones says.

Restaurant regulars are familiar with the homemade and slightly tangy BOB sauce, which has more than 30 ingredients in it. And the burger seasoning, which Jones developed himself, because the one he really liked had MSG in it. “So I kept playing,” he says, and eventually came up with one he liked without the MSG. In the beginning, the restaurant used a commercial barbeque sauce that was eventually replaced by a homemade version. And there is currently a competition, according to Jones, between the couple’s son and one of the managers to develop their own hot sauce.

“We’re constantly looking at things,” Jones says, and this desire to experiment with and improve the menu is one of the reasons the couple’s future plans include installing a test kitchen when they eventually build a corporate office.

What doesn’t seem to be in the future is any thought of slowing down. “I don’t think Lorri and I are retirement people,” Jones says.